

BOOK REVIEWS

Maya Gods of War

Karen Bassie-Sweet

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In recent decades, advances in epigraphy and iconography have shed light on the complex political landscape of the Classic Maya (AD 250–900), the dynamic topography of which was shaped by cross-polity conflict, competition, and often-fragile alliances. At the same time, the significance of “influence” from the foreign Central Mexican city of Teotihuacan has become undeniable, both expressed as soft power and as direct political and military intervention, the impact of which continued to reverberate through Maya polities even hundreds of years after Teotihuacan had collapsed. Karen Bassie-Sweet’s *Maya Gods of War* contributes to this body of scholarship through examination of the deities of local and foreign origin that oversaw Classic Maya warfare and sacrifice, the symbolic dimensions of the materials associated with them, and the political offices held by the men and women that supported these activities. The book contends that contact between Teotihuacan and the Classic Maya, especially through the Teotihuacan “entrada” event of AD 378 documented at Tikal and other sites, transformed certain political and religious aspects of Maya warfare through the introduction of new cults and military titles.

The book’s introduction touches on themes it covers, including Maya deities, warfare, and political offices, and outlines Bassie-Sweet’s methodology and the source material she uses to develop her arguments. She draws on epigraphic and iconographic analysis of Classic Maya monuments and ceramics, as well as supporting evidence found in Colonial-era texts and contemporary ethnographic observations. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss deities of Maya origin, manifestations of the rain god Chahk, and the fire god known as GIII (elsewhere referred to as the Jaguar God of the Underworld). Though the nature of Chahk deities in relation to agriculture is well attested, Bassie-Sweet focuses instead on their lesser-known martial aspects as embodiments of lightning and flint weapons. She associates GIII with two fundamental materials of Maya warfare, flint and fire.

The book pivots on chapter 3, which provides a detailed assessment of the goggle-eyed Maya manifestation of Tlaloc, an entity that is argued to have been introduced to the Maya through contact with Teotihuacan. Bassie-Sweet convincingly demonstrates that the Maya Tlaloc was associated with meteors, lightning, obsidian, and warfare. However, she does not dwell on some notable and curious disjunctions between the Maya Tlaloc and its Teotihuacan counterpart. First, the Teotihuacan Tlaloc is demonstrably a deity of agriculture, rainstorms, and warfare, but has not been clearly linked to meteors and obsid-

ian. In the process of becoming incorporated into the Maya supernatural pantheon, how did this being selectively lose some of its core attributes, while possibly gaining others? Second, while Tlaloc commonly appears as an active, fleshy anthropomorphic being that holds stalks of maize, lightning bolts, and jars of liquid in the art of Teotihuacan, the Maya Tlaloc appears most frequently as a disembodied skeletal face either by itself or as costume elements worn by a human protagonists involved in warfare and sacrifice, with few exceptions. In a volume otherwise richly illustrated with numerous line drawings and some black-and-white photographs, no illustrations of the Teotihuacan Tlaloc are included. Closer comparison of the Teotihuacan and Maya entities could have added clarification to the complex processes of cultural translation and historical memory, but Bassie-Sweet’s focus is squarely on the Maya. Despite these omissions, Bassie-Sweet does provide a much-needed assessment of zoomorphic beings that share the goggled eyes and other characteristics with the Maya Tlaloc, particularly a feline form, a serpent/caterpillar, an owl, and a lepidopteran that she argues is based on the black witch moth (*Ascalapha odorata*). The mutual role of meteors, owls, and moths as harbingers of death and illness carries interesting implications for Classic Maya warfare.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Bassie-Sweet investigates the political offices that pertain to Classic Maya warfare and the historically documented men and women that occupied them. She provides a thorough study of the frequently occurring but poorly understood titles Kaloomte’, Wiinte’naah Ch’ahom, and Yajawk’ak’, which she links to a Late Classic Maya Tlaloc cult shared among various polities. Of particular interest are the possible linkages of these roles to the control of the obsidian trade, their possible adoption from Teotihuacan and their steady rise in prominence even after Teotihuacan’s collapse, and detailed discussion of the royal women that held some of these positions in chapter 6. Before revisiting these themes in a concluding chapter, Bassie-Sweet shifts focus again to a deity, God L, which she argues was supernatural sovereign of obsidian exchange. While the role of God L as a patron of merchants and Underworld lord is well established, a possible connection to obsidian is less certain. Bassie-Sweet’s argument relies in large part on evidence in the Popol Vuh and modern ethnographic accounts that appear to link later manifestations of God L to Xucaneb Mountain, an important peak in the Cobán plateau located near trade routes that led to obsidian sources. More research is necessary to assess whether this relatively recent and localized phenomenon was applicable across the Maya region a millennium earlier.

As the most detailed study of the deities, political offices, and symbolism behind the materials of Classic Maya warfare, Mayanists will benefit from the numerous original observations presented in *Maya Gods of War*. This book, however, was not written for a wide audience, and nonspecialists will find the text dense with field-specific terminology and generally lacking in the broader anthropological observations

and theoretical engagement that would expand its relevance beyond its immediate field of study. Many specialists may even be challenged by the wide array of Maya political titles, historical figures, deities, sites, and monuments referenced throughout the text. Nonetheless, Bassie-Sweet's efforts to bridge the symbolic and supernatural facets of Classic Maya warfare with historical events provide an important perspec-

tive on poorly understood aspects of Maya cross-polity conflict and the lasting legacy of Teotihuacan within the Maya region.

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